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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1273
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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3124
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7929
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5578
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0366
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2264
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001161

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS AND SCA/RA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/21/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [MV](#)

SUBJECT: MALDIVES: REFORM-MINDED FOREIGN MINISTER RESIGNS;

REFERENDUM RESULTS UNCERTAIN

REF: A. COLOMBO 1087

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 947

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: On August 21, key Government reformer and Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed resigned from his post, joining the Attorney General and Justice Minister who resigned earlier this month (ref a). Embassy contacts tell us that Shaheed had several reasons to resign, including a scheduled no-confidence vote against him on August 22, fear that as the only remaining reformer in the government he would be unable to deliver, and concerns that President Gayoom was mending fences with his hard-line half-brother Abdullah Yameen. On August 18, Maldives' Special Majlis held a referendum to decide whether to adopt a parliamentary or presidential system. Preliminary results showed over 60 percent support for the presidential system of government endorsed by Gayoom. Opposition contacts tell us, however, that the Special Majlis has rejected the results provided by the Election Commissioner, citing irregularities with many of the ballot boxes. Official results have not yet been released. A meeting between the Special Majlis and the Election Commissioner on the afternoon of August 21 to decide how to proceed resulted in an impasse and a walkout by four of the committee members, leaving the committee unable to act for lack of a quorum. Despite the delayed results, the Special Majlis plans to hold a 3-day intensive drafting session next weekend to try to push forward with finishing the constitution. If the presidential system is declared the official winner, the burden will fall to Gayoom to implement a presidential system in keeping with his campaign promises of a "U.S.-style" government. End summary.

Former Minister Resigns Over Lack of Progress on Reform

[1](#)2. (C) On August 21, key Government reformer and Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed resigned, claiming that a "conservative guard within the government" is resisting

reform. Rumors of his impending resignation have been circulating since Attorney General Hassan Saeed and Minister of Justice Mohamed Jameel, also key Government reformers, left their posts on August 5. Shaheed told the press that in the face of reform delays, "the answer is to work outside the system and find a middle ground and provide an alternative." He applauded President Gayoom for the risks he has taken so far in implementing reforms and pledged his continuing support for the reform process. Shaheed reportedly submitted his resignation late last week, but the President refused to accept it until after the referendum scheduled for August 18.

Shaheed's departure leaves Gayoom with only 9 of 13 cabinet ministers. State Minister for Foreign Affairs Abdullah Shahid, a senior career diplomat, has been appointed as Acting Foreign Minister.

13. (C) Embassy contacts tell us that Shaheed had several reasons to resign, including a scheduled no-confidence vote against him on August 22 because of his recent critical comments on the parliament. Although his opponents were unlikely to get the two-thirds majority required to remove a sitting minister, Shaheed would have been undermined by any sizable vote against him. Opposition Majlis member Mariya Didi, a personal friend of Shaheed's, told Poloff on August 19 that Shaheed felt that he could not push the reform process along by himself. In the absence of reform partners Saeed and Jameel, he felt he would not be able to deliver, she said. Opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) President Mohamed Munavvar told Poloff on August 17 that Shaheed was concerned that a political rapprochement was underway between President Gayoom and his hard-line half-brother Abdullah Yameen, who might soon come back into the Government. This, Munavvar said, signaled to Shaheed that

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the President was no longer serious about reform.

Referendum Results Not Yet Final

14. (C) On August 18, a popular referendum was held to decide whether to adopt a parliamentary or presidential system. Preliminary results showed over 60 percent support for the presidential system of government, which was endorsed by Gayoom. However, the MDP, which supported the parliamentary system, has rejected these results, claiming the vote was rigged. MDP contacts tell us that the eleven-member committee of the Special Majlis, which is responsible for the referendum, has rejected the results provided by the Election Commissioner, citing irregularities with over half of the ballot boxes. Official results have not yet been released. According to an independent Maldives news website, a meeting between the Special Majlis committee and the Election Commissioner on the afternoon of August 21 to decide how to proceed broke up in acrimony, with four of the eleven members walking out in protest. This deprived the committee of the quorum needed to act. Both a recount and a re-vote appeared to be possible options, but both the committee and the Election Commissioner seemed reluctant to take responsibility for ordering such a step.

15. (C) Although the vote was peaceful, there were allegations of various irregularities. Several embassy contacts have complained that their dead relatives' names were included in the voter registration list, suggesting that extra votes could have been cast on their behalf. In some precincts, there were more votes in the ballot boxes than voters on the list. In one district 60 ballot papers simply disappeared. The opposition MDP claimed that the ink used to mark voters fingers was easily washed off, allowing some to re-vote. They also charged that wealthy parliamentarians were bringing boatloads of resort workers to Male to vote a second time. Arguably, their complaints were somewhat supported by the historically high voter turnout, which is improbable given the number of Maldivians living and working abroad. The opposition also complained that party

representatives were forced to leave their positions outside polling areas after 4:30 p.m., despite referendum regulations that allowed them to observe throughout the day.

¶6. (C) There were also reports of unfair tactics being used in the run-up to the referendum. The MDP cites a pay raise of nearly thirty percent given to Atoll Chiefs only two days before the elections. Ahmed Muizzu, a ruling party Member of Parliament and Special Majlis member, told Poloff on August 19 that many Atoll Chiefs and those in charge of voting in the resort and industrial islands were pressured to make sure their voters supported the President's preferred outcome. If they did not, he said, their jobs would be at risk.

Acting Foreign Minister Promises Support for Reform Agenda

¶7. (C) Acting Foreign Minister Abdullah Shahid called Ambassador on August 21 to say that the Ministry staff were "shocked and saddened" by Shaheed's resignation, but assured him that the Ministry would continue to back the government's reform course. He did not yet know who would replace Shaheed as Foreign Minister. Shahid sought to minimize the charges of irregularities in the conduct of the referendum, and hoped that the informal Commonwealth election observation mission would issue a statement on their assessment of the referendum.

Work on the Constitution Continues

¶8. (C) Despite the delayed results, the Special Majlis plans to hold a 3-day intensive drafting session on a resort island next weekend to try to push forward with finishing the

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draft constitution. The opposition MDP has said that, although they do not accept the results of the referendum, they will continue to engage in drafting the constitution and plan to attend the retreat.

¶9. (C) COMMENT: We think it unlikely that the Commonwealth observers, who consisted of a small handful of informal poll-watchers, will feel able to issue a statement regarding the overall validity of the referendum. The resignation of the Foreign Minister, a close Embassy contact, represents a significant setback for the Government's reform agenda. Uncertainty about Gayoom's next moves has led to speculation that hard-liners and loyalists will be chosen as replacements. One Male' rumor claims that a Muslim fundamentalist Adhaalath Party member will be offered the Justice Ministry, while another claims Gayoom's daughter Dunya will be the next Foreign Minister. If the presidential system is declared the official winner, the burden will fall to Gayoom to implement a presidential system in keeping with his campaign promises of a "U.S.-style" government. The outcome of the referendum has left an opening for Gayoom to either re-energize his reform agenda, or back further away. As Maldives' public has increasing exposure to greater democratic rights, they will likely show less tolerance for his autocratic tendencies. The MDP, for its part, so far seems serious about continuing to engage constructively on a new constitution. Ambassador and other Embassy officials will be in Maldives August 28-29 to inaugurate the U.S. pavilion of the Hotel and Trade Show. They will seek further details on these important political developments.

BLAKE